UNITED NATIONS

A

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/47/336
30 July 1992

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Forty-seventh session
Item 112 of the provisional agenda*

PATTERN OF CONFERENCES

Review of the Office of Conference Services

Report of the Secretary-General

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. In its resolution 46/190 of 20 December 1991, the General Assembly recalled the Secretary-General's proposal made at its forty-fourth session to undertake a review of the Department of Conference Services during the biennium 1990-1991, as well as the relevant decisions of the Assembly in this regard, and, in paragraph 26, the Assembly requested:

> "the Secretary-General, with the assistance of a task force composed of appropriate Secretariat units and with supplementary assistance of experts from outside the United Nations, as appropriate, to be coordinated by the Management Advisory Service and financed through existing resources of the Department of Conference Services, to review the organizational structure, technological innovations and working methods of the Department, taking into account previous studies, with a view to enhancing efficiency and effectiveness, and to report his recommendations to the General Assembly at its forty-seventh session, through the Committee on Conferences and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions."

2. The Secretary-General has conducted a review of the Office of Conference Services in accordance with the above-mentioned resolution, and the findings and recommendations of that review are presented in the present report. Given the limited resources available and the severe constraints of time, the review concentrated upon the Office of Conference Services at United Nations Headquarters. The review also drew upon findings and recommendations of many previous reports and studies on a variety of aspects of conference servicing and upon studies by outside experts.

II. SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FINDINGS

A. Working methods

3. In general, the working methods of the Office of Conference Services have been found to be efficient and effective, although, as indicated in the following paragraphs, there is scope for improvement in some areas. In important respects, however, the problems encountered by conference services are the result of external factors:

(a) The increasing demand for meetings and their related support services as the result of new global challenges and developments;

(b) The concentration of conferences and meetings at certain periods of the year and their uneven distribution throughout the year and throughout the system;

(c) The significant number of meetings either convened or cancelled at very short notice;

(d) The late submission of documents for processing;

(e) The submission of documents that are incomplete, illegible or otherwise do not meet the criteria set out in editorial directives.

1. Meetings planning

4. Good planning is particularly important in conference servicing activities, and a significant portion of the time and resources of the Office of Conference Services is devoted to planning: the preparation of the calendar of conferences and meetings, the scheduling of interpreters and the control of the processing of documents. Global planning of the use of conference servicing resources is important if there is to be effective and efficient coordination of the scheduling, forecasting and planning of conferences and meetings at all United Nations conference centres and optimum use of conference-servicing resources worldwide. There should be more systematic, mandatory consultations between conference services and substantive offices. Despite the importance of close coordination of planning by conference services at Headquarters, the United Nations Office at Geneva and the United Nations Office at Vienna, these offices do not yet benefit from an automated programming and planning system.

2. Interpretation

5. The Interpretation Service at Headquarters is now using a computer-based system for the scheduling of interpreters' assignments; this system is useful but would be enhanced by access to an electronic database on the calendar of meetings. Planning for the services of interpreters, as for other staff required to service meetings is greatly complicated by the unpredictability of demand. In 1991, for example, 32 per cent of the total number of meetings with interpretation scheduled at Headquarters were cancelled. Although the practice of over-programming (under-recruitment, that is, recruiting fewer interpreters than would be required to meet all official requests for services) helps offset the effect of these cancellations to a large extent, some under-utilization of resources still occurs. Cancellations are particularly costly when they occur at very short notice, when it is too late to halt the recruitment of temporary staff since contracts have already been entered into.

6. Interpretation staff could be used more efficiently through exchanges of interpreters between New York, Geneva and Vienna, in particular in view of the under-utilization of interpreters at the United Nations Office at Vienna during certain periods. Although arrangements for exchange of interpretation staff are in effect between New York and both Geneva and Vienna, similar arrangements are not yet fully in place for exchanges of staff between Geneva and Vienna. Full advantage could be taken of such exchanges if periods of low activity in one duty station could be made to coincide with peak periods in other duty stations. Another problem is that there is a severe shortage of

qualified freelance interpreters with certain language combinations available locally in New York. In addition, it takes a long time to fill vacancies, partly because the present system of recruitment through world-wide competitive examinations is slow and partly because it is difficult to attract qualified interpreters to accept permanent employment at Headquarters.

3. Verbatim reporting and précis writing

7. In addition to the problem of unpredictability of demand and the need for coordination with substantive services described above, which affect verbatim reporters as well as interpreters and précis writers, another difficulty should be noted: the long delays in the issuance of the final texts of verbatim records as a result of the time required for editing, leading to the accumulation of a substantial backlog.

8. Précis writing for meetings of bodies entitled to summary records is done by translators; the efficient utilization of their services is affected by the changes at short notice in the scheduling of meetings. A shortage of staff results in delays in the translation of summary records, which in turn leads to delays in their simultaneous distribution in all official languages.

4. Document processing

9. In some cases, delays in the timely submission of documents to the Office of Conference Services for processing give rise to extremely tight schedules for document processing, reduces quality control and causes extension of work beyond regular hours, increasing costs and reducing efficiency. In other cases, the submission of documents that do not meet established criteria also adversely affects processing. There is insufficient compliance by both author departments and Member States with directives and guidelines issued by conference services on the timely submission of manuscripts for processing and on the quality of such submissions.

(a) Editing

10. The organization of editorial services in the Secretariat as a whole as described in the report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly at its forty-sixth session (A/C.5/46/47) is being reviewed in the light of the subsequent restructuring of the Secretariat. Consequently, the comments in this report are limited to those related to verbatim records (described in para. 8 above) and general observations concerning the need for compliance with existing guidelines for quality of documents and timely submission.

(b) Translation

11. In addition to the problems of late submission and quality of documents (see para. 8 above) and an increasing workload, which requires increasing recourse to contractual translation services, the translation services chronically suffer from severe lack of appropriate office accommodation.

12. It has also been difficult to recruit qualified translators, particularly with certain language combinations. Competitive examinations do not always yield a sufficient number of successful candidates to fill existing vacancies. Finding a sufficient number of qualified free-lance translators during periods of peak demand has also proven difficult, because of tight market conditions and budgetary constraints. There are also relatively few terminologists at Headquarters, where there is a significantly lower ratio of terminologists to translators (1:50) than in other organizations, such as the Canadian Bureau of Translation (1:25) or the Commission of the European Communities (1:30).

(c) Text processing

13. The text-processing units, continuing to make an innovative application of modern word processing software and equipment to meet the language needs of the Organization, are converting to more powerful software and a more flexible, up-to-date hardware platform based on microcomputers linked on local area networks (LANs).

(d) Reproduction

14. The reproduction facility is well equipped and adequately housed. It has the capacity to produce virtually all parliamentary documentation internally. A detailed review of the reproduction plant was conducted by external experts as part of the review, and the experts concluded that the plant is capable of producing consistently high quality work and recommended that it be utilized to the fullest extent possible. It noted that more and more publications are being printed "in-house". However, the experts also noted that the special requirements of the United Nations for reproduction of an extremely high volume of documentation often on a rush basis to meet the needs of meetings of intergovernmental bodies create inefficiencies and high costs. They also found that the management and management processes, particularly costing and planning functions, need to be strengthened and more fully developed.

15. Previous reviews of United Nations documentation identified the possibility of obtaining major savings in printing, distribution and storage by reducing the size of documents through type-setting and more efficient formatting of pages. Although in the past the proposed changes were difficult to make, the new word-processing and electronic publishing software and equipment now being installed would readily allow for such typesetting at no additional cost.

(e) Distribution and storage

16. Since distribution comes at the end of the workflow related to document processing, any delays that take place upstream have a major impact upon this activity, a large portion of which is handled manually. Delays in processing a document in any language can lead to an accumulation of the documents in the other languages awaiting simultaneous distribution, adding to an already serious problem of lack of adequate space.

5. Publications

17. While author departments are required to submit timetables as part of their submissions for the publications programme, these timetables are not sufficiently specific and are rarely adhered to. Moreover, publications are not given first priority in the reproduction schedule programme and are scheduled when capacity is available.

18. Although the primary function of the Publishing Division is to print or arrange for the printing of parliamentary documents (see para. 14 above), public information materials, materials included in the publications programme of the Organization and printed materials required for internal administrative purposes, over the past three years it has undertaken additional functions as a publisher. A Publications Activity Group has been established to identify areas in which market demand would justify the publication of books that, although not produced in response to specific mandates of intergovernmental bodies, would nevertheless increase the public understanding of the objectives and activities of the Organization and to propose publications to meet that demand.

19. While the encouraging trend in activities of the Sales Section was noted, there remain several problem areas:

(a) Insufficient involvement of the Sales Section in the early stages of the preparation of manuscripts;

(b) Delays in the order fulfilment, packing and mailing activities;

(c) Infrequent market studies and research forecasting sales by region and by types of publication;

(d) Lack of an accounting system suitable for commercial operations.

Many projects have been postponed because of lack of funding. In connection with the concept of reinvesting some of the revenue generated by publications, data on other United Nations organizations has been collected. It was observed that one major organization of the United Nations system invests 75 per cent of the revenues from sales of its publications into a revolving fund.

6. Library and information services

20. The working methods of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library for several library and information services entail labour-intensive, time-consuming intervention. While some functions, such as acquisition, indexing and cataloguing have been automated, this automation is incomplete. Some of the most labour-intensive activities, such as serials and documents checklisting, are still performed manually and entail duplication of work at several points. The Library is currently finalizing a Request for Proposal (RFP) for the design and installation of a Library Integrated Management Information System (UNLIMIS). As such a system will integrate all the functions and procedures of the library management, including those bibliographic functions performed by the UNBIS system now resident on the mainframe in the New York computing Section. It will be one key to the efficiency of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library.

21. The other key to the efficiency of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library is the internal restructuring of its organization. To meet the objective set out in the medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997 of having the libraries of the United Nations function as a network of cooperating information centres within a wider framework of cooperation with the libraries of other organizations of the system through ACCIS, on the one hand, producing and processing data, and, on the other, supporting delegates, missions, Secretariat staff members and researchers from outside in their needs for documentary and factual information, a highly simplified structure will be implemented soon. There is a need to strengthen the senior management of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library.

22. Indexing is the core work for processing information resources and indexing of United Nations documents is a primary responsibility of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library, although it is also done in part by the Library at the United Nations Office at Geneva. However, there is a gap in the indexing for pre-1980 documents and certain documents have never been indexed. The United Nations Bibliographic Information System (UNBIS), maintained by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library since 1980, is available on the mainframe of the New York Computing Section, as well as on-line to non-United Nations users on-line through the external Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) and will soon become available on compact disc (CD-ROM) also. An easy accessibility, not only to UNBIS but to the documentary databases of the United Nations system as a whole, is highly desirable, as indicated in the report of the Secretary-General to the Economic and Social Council on international cooperation in the field of informatics. 1/ UNBIS will remain the common database for the United Nations libraries.

23. Cataloguing is another important process for organizing information resources. Since 1980, the card catalogues were discontinued. While retrospective conversion for cataloguing periodicals in machine-readable format is almost complete, pre-1980 monographs are yet to be converted. As part of the agreement with the Research Libraries Information Network, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library is downloading bibliographic descriptions for materials to be catalogued, which has decreased the related workload to some extent.

24. With respect to the users' services, the Dag Hammarskjöld Library provides access to external databases such as DIALOG, LEXIS, NEXIS and RLIN, which bring together hundreds of external resources. The costs limit the usage by the Library's reference librarians, although their role is to assist users to make optimum use of information resources. Consideration is now being given to the establishment of a United Nations Research Service, modelled after such services of the United States Library of Congress and Canada's Library of Parliament. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library has a reading room and service facilities that are split over three floors, resulting in certain duplication and inconvenience to users.

25. The system of depository libraries, at which United Nations documents and publications are deposited, includes 330 libraries in Member States. Under the terms of their agreements with the United Nations, such libraries are expected to place the material received in the care of qualified library staff, to keep it in good order and to make it accessible to the public, free of charge, at reasonable hours. The United Nations may inquire into the observance of the conditions of deposit by questionnaires or by visits, although the latter activity is constrained by the limited resources available for such purposes. There has been no regular monitoring of the activities of many depository libraries and of their maintenance of the collection of United Nations documents and publications.

26. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library also has a severe space problem. Although it is mandated to retain original copies of the United Nations documentation in all languages of issuance, no more space will be available for documents as from 1993. An engineering test would be required to determine whether compact shelving could be used in the third basement.

B. Technological innovations

27. The strategy for the application of technological innovations in conference servicing is described in paragraph 39.11 of the medium-term plan for the period 1992-1997. 2/ It has so far been applied with some success in the implementation of the Documents Records, Information and Tracking System (DRITS), the assignments, scheduling and management information system for interpreters, the text-processing system, the use of technological innovations in the Verbatim Reporting Section, the introduction of electronic mail, the computer-based desktop mapping system in the Cartographic Unit, and various electronic publishing systems, including the introduction of desktop publishing technology in the copy preparation area and the production of the United Nations Journal. Outside experts, in addition to the Joint Inspection Unit, have confirmed that the preferred medium for full text storage of documents is the optical disk; the progress made in the implementation of the first phase of the project to establish an optical disk storage and retrieval system will be described in a separate report to the General Assembly.

28. There remain problems, however, in the application of technological innovations. Resource constraints have made it necessary to introduce workstations in an uneven manner; the absence of a Headquarters-wide wiring

infrastructure has impeded the movement of documents electronically, both within the Office of Conference Services and between author departments and the Office of Conference Services, and document-image-scanning input devices and fax machine interconnections have not been very well planned. As a result, the advantages and benefits of these technologies have not been fully exploited. While DRITS now provides managers with an up-to-date means to monitor and control the document preparation and production flow and collect management reports and statistics for decision-making and reporting purposes, it has taken a very long time to develop and still would benefit from additional subsystems.

29. In reviewing methods of work, consideration was also given to possibilities for gains in efficiency through further applications of technological innovations. There is a need to expedite computerization of the calendar of conferences and meetings, for example, and recent advances in technology may justify a reconsideration of the use of videoconferencing techniques, instead of sending a full complement of interpreters, translators and other staff to service conferences and meetings held away from their duty stations. The favourable experience in the Verbatim Reporting Section in the use of scanners to input texts of statements provided by delegations has been encouraging, and there are prospects for further productivity gains in this area.

30. The Translation Division at Headquarters is in the process of developing better and more efficient access to machine-assisted translation, whereby the translators benefit from a computerized system of referencing and terminology. Attention was drawn to the productivity increases following the introduction of translator workstations, connected with other machine-assisted translation facilities, by the Bureau of Translation of the Government of Canada.

31. However, the transmission of documents in electronic form, the expansion of DRITS, the establishment of DRITS subsystems, the improvement of the Forward Echelon, the establishment of computer workstations for translators and editors and the transmission of voting records in electronic form are all dependent upon the planned improvements in the networking infrastructure through a rewiring of offices at Headquarters and other duty stations and the corresponding upgrade of the United Nations global telecommunications network now in progress.

32. In the distribution area, a subsystem of DRITS, in operation since July 1991, is used to locate documents and monitor the number of documents in the areas for bulk distribution. This is considered to be a useful management tool to assist the distribution manager to schedule the work requirements and control documents distribution; once bar-codes are in place on all documents, the distribution process will be speeded up. Additional sorting and packaging equipment is being installed at the United Nations Office at Geneva for the distribution of documents; this automated system reduces the amount of manual handling of documents required and offers considerable advantages for productivity improvement and reduction of delays in processing documents at all stages.

C. Organizational structure

33. While the present overall structure of the Office of Conference Services is considered adequate for present purposes, it is being analysed in the context of a wider review of the structure of the Secretariat as a whole.

34. In the meantime, within divisions, some steps are being taken to improve the organizational structure - such as, for example, the formal establishment of a separate organizational unit for contractual translation within the Translation Division, the establishment of the Technological Innovations Programme (now part of the Editorial and Official Records Division) as an independent organizational unit reporting directly to the Assistant Secretary-General for Conference Services, the establishment of a United Nations Publications Section in the Publishing Division, the formal establishment of a Publications Activity Unit (that now exists on an informal basis) and the possible grouping of internal and external printing responsibilities together in a Printing Section, and the replacement of the present two services in the Dag Hammarskjöld Library by three sections responsible, respectively, for United Nations materials, external materials and user services.

III. ACTION BY THE SECRETARIAT

35. Many of the measures arising from the review can be taken within the established mandates and policy guidelines of the Office of Conference Services, and steps have been initiated to implement them, to the extent permitted by available resources. Some examples are given below:

(a) Establishment of a meetings planning database: a computer software programme has been developed for Meetings Planning at Headquarters and the necessary equipment has been installed. Data relating to the calendar of conferences will now be entered in the database;

(b) Cross-exchange of language staff: to ensure full utilization of the interpretation service at the United Nations Office at Vienna, there will be greater cross-exchange of language staff. Arrangements have been established between New York and Geneva and recently between New York and Vienna to use language staff during periods of peak activity; for example, interpreters from Vienna were assigned to service the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, thus increasing the capacity utilization of the Vienna team and reducing requirements for temporary assistance for the Conference. Arrangements between Geneva and Vienna similar to those between New York and Geneva are now being strengthened;

(c) Preparation of documents: drafting courses offered by the Training Service will be reviewed to ensure that staff members of author departments are informed of the editorial requirements of United Nations documents and publications. The current Editorial Manual will be thoroughly revised and separate guidelines for authors prepared, based upon the Manual. Standard formats will be established for documents submitted in electronic form;

(d) Issuance of all verbatim records in final form (subject to approval by the organs concerned): verbatim records of the Security Council and of the plenary meetings of the General Assembly have been issued first in provisional form and then in final edited form as part of the official records of these bodies. In view of the long delays in the issuance of the final text and the increased capacity of the Verbatim Reporting Section as the result of applications of technological innovations, arrangements are being made to issue all verbatim records in final form, subject to correction. Consolidated corrigenda would be issued periodically by the Section. This will make the final text of meeting records available to delegations with a minimum of delay and will lead to a reduction in typesetting and reproduction costs once the backlog has been eliminated. The Official Records Editing Section will concentrate on the elimination of the backlog that has accumulated over the past decade, working backwards from 1991. Once the backlog is eliminated, editors will be able to devote more time and attention to the editing of other official records to ensure their timely issuance;

(e) Contractual translation: following the recommendations of the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) in 1980, there has been increasing use of external contractual translation; it is now planned to establish a separate organizational unit for contractual translation within the Translation Division. Steps are now being taken to establish the unit, which initially will comprise one Professional staff member (P-5) and three General Service category staff members now in the Office of the Director of the Division and assigned functions related to the administration of contractual translation services;

(f) New formats for documents: in view of the plans to convert the text-processing pools to the use of WordPerfect software and networked computer workstations during the biennium 1992-1993 and to establish electronic typesetting and publishing capabilities in the Publishing Division, new formats and typesetting for United Nations documents will be introduced in order to reduce reliance on external typesetting and printing, to obtain savings in production costs and to reduce storage requirements for documents. While previous reviews of United Nations documentation have identified the possibility of obtaining savings in printing and distribution and storage by reducing the size of documents through typesetting and more efficient formatting of pages, in the past such changes were not easy to make. However, the text-processing software now being introduced readily allows for such typesetting at little or no additional cost. The Office of Conference Services is reviewing various proposals for new double column formats for parliamentary documentation to determine their suitability for documents in all official languages and to analyse in detail the expected costs and benefits from such formats. The full-scale introduction of any new format as recommended will not be possible until the conversion to the new text-processing software has been completed;

(g) Improved costing and planning in publishing: a systems analysis of planning and costing requirements in the Publishing Division has been carried out and proposals for establishment of an accounting and tracking system for

the Publications Programme of the United Nations have been prepared, to be implemented on a local area network of personal computers using standard software packages and fully integrated into DRITS as well as consistent with United Nations standards and IMIS architecture;

(h) Documents storage in the library: inquiries into the use of compact shelving have been initiated and interim measures to meet the immediate needs for additional storage space will be taken.

36. Other measures, although within existing mandates and policy guidelines, cannot be implemented within the resources allocated for 1992-1993; the expected costs and benefits of these recommendations will be analysed in detail and appropriate proposals will be included in the programme budget proposals for 1994-1995. These include a number of recommendations for the application of technological innovations in various areas of conference and library services, such as the expansion of the Documents Records, Tracking and Information System (DRITS) to increase its speed of operation and to establish a number of subsystems, the establishment of an automated system for documents distribution at Headquarters similar to that established at Geneva, an increase in the number of networked computer workstations for translators and editors and the establishment of an effective local network or communications linkages.

37. In view of the request of the General Assembly, in section VI of its resolution 46/185 of 20 December 1991, that the Secretary-General "review the overall publications policy of the Organization, including its technical aspects and possible coordination at the level of the system, and present a report to the General Assembly at its forty-eighth session", the present report does not include any recommendations concerning publishing activities. The findings and recommendations of this review relating to publishing activities will be incorporated into the wider study called for in Assembly resolution 46/185.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

38. The following recommendations require policy guidance or other action by Member States:

(a) Improved scheduling of meetings:

(i) The precise requirements of a body and schedules of its meetings should be determined well in advance, in order to reduce under-utilization or avoid excess capacity;

(ii) The entitlement of bodies for which the utilization factor has remained below the established benchmark standards over a period of time should be reviewed by the Committee on Conferences to determine whether they still reflect actual requirements;

(iii) Although the entitlements of the legislative bodies are known well in advance, some services are cancelled sometimes at very short notice. Meetings of expert bodies with limited memberships, in particular, sometimes cancel interpretation services in some languages at the very last minute. Such bodies should be encouraged to give the Office of Conference Services sufficient notice of any changes in their requirements for language services;

(b) Videoconferencing: videoconferencing has been referred to as an alternative to sending interpreters to service meetings abroad. Originally, the cost of videoconferencing outweighed the benefits; however, in view of the growing number of major conferences, remote videoconferencing acquires new relevance today. This year, 100 interpreters travelled to Rio de Janeiro to service the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and some 80 were assigned to the eighth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development at Cartegena (Colombia) in February. If Member States have no objections to the use of these techniques, a cost-benefit analysis of state-of-the-art teleconferencing will be carried out;

(c) Entitlements: since meetings convened for the purpose of drafting reports or resolutions are generally not suitable for recorded coverage, intergovernmental bodies should be encouraged to discuss drafting in informal sessions for which summary or verbatim records would not be required.

V. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

39. None of the recommendations proposed for implementation during the biennium 1992-1993 has financial implications. Either they do not involve expenditures or they are to be implemented within the financial resources provided for in the 1992-1993 programme budget. For 1994-1995, possible innovations or reforms highlighted by the review will be studied further, in the context of the overall resource availability and other priorities for possible inclusion in the proposed programme budget for 1994-1995. These include development of subsystems for DRITS, the establishment of an automated documents distribution system at Headquarters, further expansion of networked computer workstations for editors and translators, further development of the optical disk system for the storage and retrieval of parliamentary documents and, possibly, the introduction of teleconferencing techniques.

Notes

1/ E/1992/78.

2/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 6 (A/45/6/Rev.1), vol. II.